

Negotiating Learning: Are Shortcuts Good or Bad for Our Students?

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Today's increasingly globalised world places specific demands on young people pursuing tertiary education. There is a growing contention that students are increasingly "engaging in shortcut behaviour" due to the competitive nature of studies at Malaysian universities. Although the phrase has not been widely established in related academic areas as describing particular learning behaviour, "engaging in shortcut behaviour" may be operationally defined as a situation whereby, in order to achieve a particular learning result, a student undertakes courses of actions that are perceived to require lesser time and effort than are conventionally prescribed.

In the light of remarks and discussions on the quality of Malaysian university graduates, there is a need to investigate how students live through their university lives. If students do engage in the so-called shortcut behaviour, does this potentially have a bearing on the quality of graduates we are producing as human resource or as citizens? Do courses of action that reduce time and effort necessarily have negative impact on students' performance in the university when they enter employment or face life challenges in general?

A research carried out amongst students of Universiti Sains Malaysia (USM) in 2005¹ has led to a few conclusions about the way Malaysian students negotiate their academic lives on campus. This study used a quantitative method of assessing students' behaviour that may be described as an attempt to use shortcuts. In the study, questionnaires were administered to 809 students, the majority (69 per cent) of which were female. The students interviewed were fairly representative of the multiple ethnic, economic and academic backgrounds of students of institutions of higher learning in Malaysia.

Where the landscape of students' academic life is concerned, the research focused on students' actions and decisions in classes, while completing academic assignments and in gathering information about academic and administrative matters. Students were asked questions relating to their thinking processes in class, their efforts in completing assignments given by lecturers and the degree that they would go to, to obtain information related to academic and administrative matters.

The results of the study indicate that the variables of age, gender, year of studies, accumulated academic grades, academic programmes, area of origin and birth order do not have significant relationships with students' decisions to engage in shortcut behaviour.

The study also concludes that if students are given choices they prefer group work to individual work for assignments stipulated in their academic courses. Students' decisions may be based on a few factors. Students may feel more confident doing group work because this provides them with an opportunity to confer and double-check facts and content with the designated course mates. Individual work may be isolating and lonely and students may choose to do group work to avoid this and to make completing assignments more psychologically bearable. On the other hand, students may also choose group work as a means to cope with the burden of multiple assignments given throughout a semester.

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Group work is not necessarily a bad thing for students to choose even though it signifies a decision to engage in "shortcuts". In many employment situations, team-work is an encouraged method of working. Group work may also teach students to be tolerant, receptive of differing ideas and willing to share resources. All are admirable qualities of a citizen.

On the other hand, some findings of the study may negate the values of group work. The USM study finds that when students are given group assignments, they tend to minimise efforts and thought processes in contributing collaboratively towards completing

the project. They shy away from making independent judgements about the direction of the assignments and prefer to follow the decisions of the majority in the group. Thus, in order for group work to benefit students, the university authority may want to inculcate in the students the feeling of ownership and responsibility over their team project and thus, compel them to contribute equally towards decision making processing in the course of completing the assignment. In such situations, “shortcuts” can actually have positive results.

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Students also engage in shortcut behaviour during lectures by being passive. This may indicate their preferences for the “wait-and-see” strategy. This can be associated with the teaching and learning culture during their pre-university education whereby active learning is not encouraged and spoon-feeding prevails. In this kind of environment, students usually wait passively for teachers to give out information. Another possible explanation is students’ lackadaisical attitudes towards the learning process. Students may feel that it is not necessary to commit to the extra work by participating when their peers are not doing the same. This may indicate that which in psychology may be termed as a “social loafing” pattern among students.

The USM study discovers that the highest “shortcut” behaviour incidents relate to the aspect of making decisions. Students are more likely to take shortcuts when making decisions regarding courses to take as well as the major and minor programmes to choose. This is worrying since students are making these important decisions not by carefully considering their choices but following suggestions from their seniors and friends. Again, this may reflect a lack of independence in judgment and actions on the part of the students.

As a means of negotiating academic life, shortcut behaviour has both merits and demerits towards development of students into potential human capital and citizens. If the goal of education in Malaysia is to produce graduates with the best academic performance, then shortcuts may be seen as feasible strategies for students to achieve this. However, lines may have to be drawn at actions and decisions that are ethical and legal. On the other hand, if the aim of university education is the process of learning, which is to say, the engagement of students’ minds in deliberate thought processes and the acquisition by students of skills of independent judgement and action, then shortcut behaviour as defined in this article, if pervasive amongst our students, is a cause for due concern.

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